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ABSTRACT

The results of a survey of 55 Illinois school districts which had experienced declining enrollment and surplus school space are reported in this paper. All 55 districts had closed at least one school as a result of enrollment decline, resulting in a total of 89 school closures. The two most important criteria for selecting the schools to be closed were changes in the school age population in the area served by the school and the flexibility of the building with respect to the type of instructional program. Other important factors were the structural condition and age of the building and maintenance costs. The school district respondents emphasized the need for careful planning and research prior to making the decision to close a school. They also noted the necessity of allowing citizens to participate in the decision making process. (Author/DS)

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FACILITIES AND DECLINING ENROLLMENT

State Board of Education
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Between the end of World War II and the fall of 1971 Illinois public school enrollment increased 113 percent, reaching approximately 2,373,000 in the fall of 1971. However, enrollment in the fall of 1985 is projected to decrease to 1,894,000. The downward trend in the projected enrollment pattern is mainly due to a lower birth rate, a changing pattern of migration, and changing values and attitudes about family life.

The impact of enrollment decline is seldom fully anticipated by administrators or school board members, but the problems created creep steadily forward, increasing in scope and magnitude with the passage of time. Due to the substantial variability in enrollment from one year to the next, the first year of decline is not noticed. The second year of decline may draw some attendtion, but will likely be ignored. As more teachers at higher grade levels begin to have lighter loads, and as the pupil-teacher ratio at the early elementary level decreases substantially, it becomes possible to consolidate classes, and empty space appears. The downward trend in enrollment makes its greatest impression when it arrives to the point that empty classrooms appear and when school buildings can be either closed or used for other purposes.

Faced with the problem of surplus classrooms and school buildings, the initial reaction of the school board and the administrators will be to question whether the enrollment will continue to shrink. Such doubts lead them to consider using the facilities or classrooms for alternative educational or community uses, or to consider leasing the facility.

Declining enrollment creates an urgent need for knowledge about alternative uses of empty classrooms and school buildings, criteria for selecting which school building to close, and how to minimize the trauma of closing a school. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the solutions used in Illinois public school districts which have experienced declining enrollment.

The experiences of others may help administrators and board members who will have to cope with the problem of utilizing surplus facilities.

The questionnaire was designed after detailed study of a report prepared by Educational Facilities Laboratories titled, Fewer Pupils/Surplus Space. The report, based on a national sample of urban school districts, discussed facility use during declining enrollment, developing the data required to justify a school closing, and the process of closing a school. In order to meet the purpose of this study, the questionnaire includes the following six questions: (1) What criteria were utilized in selecting the school to be closed? (2) After closing the school building, what was done with it? (3) If the facility was sold or rented, to whom was it sold or rented? (4) If the attendance center is presently being used by a unit or agency other than the school district, for what purpose is it being used? (5) If the building in which the school was housed is presently being used by the district, what use is being made of it? (6) Describe, in detail, the process your district used in arriving at the decision to close a school and in relating that decision to the students, parents, and staff of the selected school.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTING SCHOOL TO BE CLOSED

Respondents to the survey indicated five major criteria for selecting the school to be closed:

(1) Changes in the school age population in the area served by the school;

(2) Reorganization within the school district;

(3) The structural condition of the building;

(4) The maintenance cost of the building; and

(5) The adequacy of the building for instructional programs.

Of the 55 districts surveyed, all had suffered enrollment decline and had closed a school. The districts surveyed had closed a total of 89 schools. Declining enrollment in the area served by the school was indicated as the criteria of greatest importance in 29 of the schools closed, the second most important criteria in six schools and the third most important criteria in the decision to close one school. In the 25 districts indicating enrollment decline as one of the criteria used in selecting the school to be closed, 35 out of 36 school buildings closed were due, in part, to decline in the school age population in the area served by the school.

The flexibility of the building with respect to type of instructional program was indicated as a factor considered in nearly half of the 89 schools closed. It was the important consideration in 10 instances and the second most important consideration in the closing of 14 of the schools. The fact that the building was inadequate for the type of instructional program desired played a part in the decision to close 41 of the schools.

High maintenance costs and the need for substantial structural modification seemed to play a secondary role in the decision as to which school was to be closed in the sample of districts studied. These factors were indicated as the most important criteria in the closing of three schools. However, maintanance costs were indicated to have been the second or third most important consideration in the closing of 23 schools. There were 20 cases where the need for substantial structural modification and the 45 cases where maintenance costs were a factor in the decision to close a school.

Reorganization of either the grade-structure or school boundaries within the district was the determining factor over which school to close in six cases and played a secondary role in four other cases.

That maintenance costs and the need for structural modification played an important part in the decision to close a school is not too surprising when the age of the buildings which were closed is considered. The oldest building reported in the survey was 91 years old. The distribution of buildings by age is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Age of Building As Related To Criteria For Selecting the Building To Be Closed

Age of Closed Building	No. of Buildings	Closed Due to Enrollment Decline	Closed Due To Need For Structural Modification	Closed Due To Costly Maintenance
1-10	2	0	1	0
11-20	9	9	0	4
21-30	8	5	1	4
31-40	8	3	0	1
41-50	12	5	5	7
51-60	22	3	4	11
61 and over	25	10	9	18
	86*	35**	20***	45

* The age of ten school buildings was not available.
** The age of one building was not available.
*** The age of two buildings was not available.

Among 45 schools which were reportedly closed due to costly maintenance, 36 schools were at least 40 years old. Only nine schools were less than 40 years old. Eighteen of the 20 schools which were closed because of a need for major structural renovation were over 40 years of age.

It should also be recognized that some school closings are the result of rules and regulations established by the State. The most often cited example of such cases are Recognition and Supervision Standards, especially the standard of having at least one room per grade. The expense of meeting Fire, Health and Safety Standards was also cited, along with the necessity to comply with school district desegregation guidelines.

WHAT TO DO WITH AN ABANDONED FACILITY?

Section 10-22.13 of the Illinois School Code provides that the School Board shall "decide when a site or building has become unnecessary, unsuitable or inconvenient for a school," (p. 80) and Section 10-23.5a provides that the school board may "lease school buildings to suitable lessees for educational purposes when such buildings are declared by the board to be temporarily unnecessary or unsuitable or inconvenient for a school or uses of the district." (p. 88)

In order to allow more flexibility to school districts, especially those with declining enrollment, the Illinois Office of Education was successful in amending Section 10-23.5a to allow districts to lease buildings also "...for any other purpose which serves the interests of the community..." The lease can be for a period not to exceed five years.

In order to sell a building, a school site, or portion thereof, two-thirds of the board members of a school board must approve a motion that the property be sold. Section 5-22 of the School Code provides that "The trustees of schools or other school officials having legal title to such land shall, within 60 days after receiving such notice, sell the property at public sale..." (p. 47). This section of the Code further provides for the sale of a site with or without a building to any other school district "within the boundaries of which the site is situated..." (p. 48). Sections of Article 15 of the School Code treat the sale of common school land in any township and indicate that township land

commissioners elected under the provision of this article shall be successors to the trustees of schools.

Article 34 of the School Code, which treats the Board of Education in cities over 500,000 population, grants the Board authority to lease school property "for a term not longer than 99 years..." Section 34-21 further provides that "no sale of real estate, or interest therein, used for school purposes or held in trust for schools shall be made except by the city council, upon written request of the board order by a vote of not less than 3/4 of its full membership."

The survey of districts with declining enrollment which had closed schools found that nearly half of the 89 school buildings had been sold. Of the 44 buildings sold, nearly 3/4 s were sold to private individuals or companies. Other, less significant buyers were non-profit private agencies, other public agencies, private schools, and one building had been sold to a community college.

Ten schools had been leased, half to non-profit private organizations; of the remaining five buildings, three were being rented to a public agency, one to a community college, and one building had been rented to a private school.

The survey further revealed that 20 schools have been standing unused. These buildings were older, averaging fifty-six years old, and ranging from 33 to 91 years old.

FACTORS IN THE PROCESS OF CLOSING A SCHOOL

School closings are, more often than not, an emotional issue. Katherine E. Eisenberger, in "Closing a School: Some Ways to Ease the Trauma," pointed out that frustration and anger arose due to the following:

> "The first factor for administrators and boards to deal with is the realization that there are no loyal district supporters; there are only loyal school supporters." (1, p. 33)
>
> "...when parents block school closings they are not fighting to save a building but to preserve a unique personal investment." (1, p. 33)

The personal investment which Eisenberger refers to goes beyond any financial investment. Many housewives look "toward the local school and school-related activity as an avenue for meaningful involvement." (1, p. 33) Some parents invest a great deal of time in their school and in so doing build their reputation, influence and acceptance in the neighborhood. Eisenberger adds two other sources of concern:

> "Teachers block school closings because they can mean the cold reality of the loss of jobs...like parents, (they) have to begin again to establish themselves in a new setting. They would have to begin again to gain the acceptance by new parents, by the existing faculty and staff, and probably by a new principal." (1, p. 34)
>
> "Principals will be losing all or part of a staff with which they have developed a working rapport, a unified and mostly supportive parent group, a student body that is known to them through their previous experiences with their older brothers and sisters and the possibility of being an excess principal." (1, p. 34)

An important psychological factor is related to the school as a symbol within a growing and prospering community. In rural communities up and down Illinois the abondonment of one-room country schools and the establishment of a larger school in a town or village indicated that the community had finally come into its own. Thus, a vast number of schools in rural Illinois were built between 1900 and 1930. The abandonment of a school (or schools) within a consolidated school district is therefore associated with the image of a community which has matured and is now declining. The decline of a community is related to economic factors (e.g., jobs, the tax base, etc.). The decline and death of a community also runs counter to the high regard people have for youth, vigor and growth. Other values held by many Illinois citizens, even those who are second or third generation city dwellers, are reflected in the high regard for the qualities of agrarian life. Just as the closing of one room schools was the initial step, the closing of schools in small communities is a further reminder of the loosening of our agrarian ties and subsequent changes in our value structure. After more than 200 years, elements of the Jefferson-Hamilton perception of the differences between rural versus urban values are still an important part of our acculturation process.

Due to the intensity of citizen interest in their school, a successful school closing involves (a) careful planning, (b) well-documented research, and (c) citizen involvement of the affected parents, students, teachers and administrators. The American Association of School Administrators recommends a

detailed process which lasts three years after the enrollment decline problem has been identified. The reports cited in the bibliography present an excellent treatment of the ideal process for closing a school. Therefore, rather than discuss at any length the ingredients of a successful strategy for closing schools, a few highlights are extracted from the survey when district superintendents were asked what advice they would give to other superintendents faced with the need to close a school.

There is a feeling harbored by a number of school officials, and practiced by others, that citizen involvement is unnecessary and will hinder, if not block, the implementation of a district reorganization plan which requires the closing of a school.

As one superintendent from a rural school district said, "My personal dealings in education have led me to believe you do not ask the public on this subject... They will, 90 per cent of the time, say 'no' regardless of the cost or educational value." His board closed a school without consulting the public.

Another district superintendent pointed to the need for a firm, united stance by the school board because "you cannot expound the advantages of reorganization in a rational fashion to a group unable to grasp the basic intent." Once the decision is made the administrators and the board members should "be prepared for several months of hell and a heated school board election."

Although this represents the views of some administrators and may be the case given certain circumstances, a far greater number recommend extensive

planning, research and community involvement. Comments on the questionnaires indicate the belief held by many administrators that decisions which evolve out of community participation and involvement are generally supported by the public. The comments also indicate a wide difference in the extent of participation sought which has an impact upon the extent of community support. Where citizen involvement is merely the presentation of a fait accompli at a public meeting or hearing, the response is generally not as supportive as is the case when affected parties participate in arriving at that decision.

A superintendent who successfully closed two of his six schools used the following types of participation:

1) All plans were reviewed carefully with parents active in their PTAs or who were active in other school activities;
2) Staff members were given assurances of job security and were given preference in transferring to other open positions in the school district;
3) Parents were notified before the end of the school year as to where their children would attend the following year, then the parents and the teachers visited the school.

In addition to citizen participation in the development of the alternative plans for school closing(s), public hearings are generally felt to be very important. Their function is to inform the public and to give them the opportunity to react to the plan. It was emphasized many times that the

hearings should be well publicized and that all information relevant to the alternatives before the school board should be presented. As one superintendent suggested, "Remember you're a salesman trying to sell an idea. Know your numbers, know your facts, and use a clear, concise (but complete) presentation."

Although a number of administrators mentioned the need for careful planning, none specified the components which must be considered in the plan. Basically, planning must focus on the following:

(a) Specifying the research to be completed, the talent and resources to be utilized, and the schedule for completion.

(b) From the research schedule consideration turns to the type of and the proper timing of the involvement of the community and district personnel, including the release of information to the media.

Some district superintendents felt it very important to disclose all information found from the research to the public.

Research is designed to develop alternative courses of action. The greater the research effort the easier it will be to justify the chosen course of action to the public.

The respondents to the questionnaire identified topics which should receive careful consideration. A superintendent who closed three of his seven elementary schools suggested that research should determine:

(a) What the reorganized district ought to be (which will provide answers to parents on how far their children will have to be bused);

(b) Current and anticipated enrollments in the schools; and

(c) The cost of maintaining the current organizational structure versus alternative forms of organization.[1/]

Proponents of the school closing will have to identify in rather specific terms the educational and other benefits students will derive from attending the new school. As one administrator stated "Closing a school without offering something better to the children who attend that school does not make any sense to the people, and it should not." Another administrator added, "Be sure that all facts are accurate. Know your numbers. Know the data, and be prepared to defend them."

1/ A detailed research agenda is outlined in Declining Enrollment: What to Do, American Association of School Administrators, Arlington, Virginia.

SUMMARY

Declining enrollment has awakened an interest in the process of closing schools in order to reduce operating costs in school districts. A survey was conducted of 55 school districts which had experienced enrollment shrinkage and surplus space resulting in the closing of 89 schools. The two most important criteria for selecting the school to be closed were (a) changes in the school age population in the area served by the school and (b) the flexibility of the building with respect to the type of instructional program. Other important factors were (a) the structural condition of the building and (b) the maintenance cost of the building.

The School Code delegates responsibility for the decision to lease a building to the school board. A decision to sell a building or property is made by the school board, township land commissioners or the city council (in the case of any city with a population over 500,000). Nearly half of the 89 schools closed were sold, mostly to private individuals and companies. Twenty schools have been standing unused since they were closed and another ten schools were leased.

Everyone recognizes the emotional energy which is spent when a school is to be closed. For a number of parents participation in school activities has provided them a mechanism for obtaining identity within the community. Staff in the school have their job security threatened. The school often represents a symbol of the strength of the neighborhood or community.

While some administrators feel that due to the emotionalism of the issue the public should not be consulted, the majority of the administrators surveyed believed that the trauma of closing a school can be reduced by citizen participation, especially on the part of those active in the PTAs.

Once the district has identified that it definitely has shrinkage and surplus space the general outline of the ideal process is something like the following approach. There is a need to identify the magnitude of the problem and project its duration. Involve your PTA leaders, principals, teachers, and other representatives of the community in this initial step. Secondly, after magnitude of the problem has been identified extensive planning and research are required in order to develop and disclose the information necessary to alert the community of the problem and alternative solutions. The final step, before the board decision, is a series of community hearings at which the alternatives and the implication of each are discussed. After the decision there will continue to be a need for community involvement in order to have smooth implementation.

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